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ABSTRACT

Writing is at the heart of education. The business of English teachers is to make people more comfortable in using language, particularly written language. Language serves two broad functions: (1) representing elements of external reality; and (2) defining relationships among the people who use the language. The writer's first need is to use the language to control, not eliminate, experience. The teacher's problem is to recognize where a student stands between the raw materials of life and the formulae of language. Assigning students to focus on autobiographical events is advantageous in that the events are subject to many levels of treatment, while still being based on student knowledge. Teachers may call upon student writers to make the leap from personal experience to abstraction, but the weak writer may merely paraphrase what others have written previously. Peer-directed writing emphasizes the difference between the writer's intention and the awareness of the reader. The teacher can make inferences from a student's writing errors about the student's mental processes, and can then provide feedback to the student. The teacher's goal is not to give information but to lead students to understand how language defines their relationships to other people and the external world, balancing the relationships among writer, reader, external reality, and means of signification. Errors regarding variations in usage, dialect, decorum, relationship, and tact all can send signals to the reader. To the student writer, the teacher should represent the audience--the fellowship of all who live by language. (SG)

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Concept Paper No. 4

A Goodly Fellowship of Writers and Readers

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This paper was originally delivered to the English Coalition Conference at the Wye Plantation in Maryland on July 12, 1987. It has been edited for more convenient reading, but is essentially unchanged.

A Goodly Fellowship
of Writers and Readers

Preface

Writing is at the heart of English studies. No, that is too narrow. Writing is at the heart of education--kindergarten to graduate school to the grave. If *you* wanted to say that the heart is reading or perhaps speaking, I wouldn't quarrel much, at least in some other place, but here I want to put writing at the center, and I even want to insist on the stale metaphor of animal life, to emphasize "heart" and "blood."

Recall that the ancient Milesian philosopher Thales claimed that all is water. He was aware, of course, that he was more than a puddle, but he wanted to represent the essential commonality in existence. He probably did not distinguish clearly between the literal reality of basic matter and a metaphoric representation of matter. *Our* physicists have other terms for expressing the irreducible common element of existence--a new one every decade, it seems--but they share the compulsion to name the essence. Whatever concern we have for variation, we seek at the center a sense-making, unifying power, an idea, which imparts meaning to details. For the world of English studies I will use the word "writing," but you will understand that I, like Thales, waver between literal reference and metaphoric allusion.

I really would prefer to use the word "language" to identify our center, but

then someone would ask about syntax or generative grammar or (worse) "minimal essentials of correct usage," and that's not what I mean at all, not it at all. Perhaps it *is* impossible to say just what I mean, but I'll save that for when I return to how popular preoccupations with surface correctness inhibit our understanding of language. Changing from Eliot to cummings, though, I remind you for now that "who pays attention to the syntax of things will never wholly kiss you." Our concern with language must embrace it wholly, must know it carnally. And I'd like to include all natural languages, and mathematics and logic, and visual and aural arts. But writing offers me an emblematic concreteness, a familiar set of experiences from which my theme may emerge. I can focus our attention on practical issues while maintaining a subtext to support my thesis.

You can measure my difficulty, though, when I claim an abstraction like "writing" is the concrete vehicle for my metaphoric tenor. Exotic ideas must be defined in simple terms, but ideas so common that "everyone" knows them, but "knows" them differently, must be examined in roundabout ways. Writing is one of those common ideas, a notion about which everyone feels qualified to give firm opinions. Fights about writing are often based on equivocal uses of the term. One reason we have trouble agreeing, or even making sense, is that we shift from issues of handwriting to issues of great literature without giving any warning. I will try to deal with that range, but I will usually give warning when I shift my ground.

A Less Whimsical Preface

The general business of teachers of English is to make people more comfortable in using their language. Here I am concerned with the written forms of language, but I can't imagine my writing without an imagined reader, another self bound to me by our common language in a goodly fellowship. That phrase from the *Te Deum* is a generous alternative to another phrase we sometimes bandy about in academic circles--the "community of scholars." We are bound to one another by our language.

Somehow our language represents elements of our external world--not the whole world, nor even the world as perceived by the writer, nor even the parts the writer hopes to represent, but the parts the reader can imagine as being shared with the writer. Somehow each tries to break out of our fundamental isolation to share as much of the world as our language will permit. That is "high-falutin'" talk, and I apologize for it, but it is why I think teachers of English are important people and why we need to talk about it.

If we are ever a society, or a culture, or a nation, it's because we talk to each other. But this national society requires that people talk over great distances because we *are* diverse. Some dictatorial folks imagine that we should aspire to be carbon copies, know a limited set of facts, use a restricted range of verbal forms, but the accidents of our history have ruled out that option. They believe that we should aspire toward the middle-standard range of the normal curve. I think we have no choice but to honor our origins and praise those who sing romantically of

our uniqueness. We are *so many* that we must have subgroups and sub-subgroups and sub-sub-subgroups in order to find confidantes. This does not mean that we have to break apart as the Soviet Union or Middle Europe has done. In the varieties of language patterns and lives of Americans, we celebrate special friendships, but we still claim to be English speakers and writers. We want to be separate and one at the same time. That is why the metaphors of the mosaic or the quilt or the stew pot are replacing the melting pot as an image of national life.

We who teach English hope we know enough of the variations in English that we can guide our students to a larger circle of friends. We know the writing of many communities. We can also engage in many ways of representing the world outside ourselves because we are students of language in several dialects and styles. We can, in fact, share in the goodly fellowship because we focus on its defining mechanism--language.

The writing class is a mundane place for such a grand endeavor. At the college level we have often heard that the literature class is where we study the great ideas of the Western world, and so it probably is. One day it may even include all people. But it is in the writing class that we confront the realities of survival in our own subworld. Speech is inescapable, for we desire readiness of mind, and the glittering eye is a great help in sharing another's soul for company, but writing arrests the flow of events for contemplation. The reward for the great effort of mind required to write and read together is that we share a constructed reality with a kind of intimacy that touch cannot supply. It is in writing that we leave the legacy of our selves.

Expressiveness and Social Cohesion

Let me divide the broad concept of language into the two functions it always serves: (1) the representing of some element or elements of an external reality and (2) the defining of relationships among the people who use the language. James Britton's "expressive" and "transactional" categories grow out of this long established division, so the system has recently been extremely important to composition's teachers and theorists. The expressive function enables one to give form to a welter of impressions reaching the central nervous system. We always receive more information that we can absorb, and we hypothesize that far more exists than we can sense, partly because we have invented machines to perceive what we cannot by enhancing our senses. Although we are limited by our physiological systems to perceiving a fraction of what might be known, we can process only a fraction of what we perceive. Language allows us to represent--to express--the part of our sensations we (and members of our language community) consider important and then to manipulate those ideas as we will. In the end it is our *need*, our *will*, that gives meaning to what otherwise is probably meaningless existence, the *disjecta membra*.

But it is not our will alone and untutored. We are always instructed by the language itself, the signs of our *shared* sense of need and reality. In the most obvious ways we communicate, we transact the understanding of a society, to be sure, but we also accept the identity and associations inherent in the particular forms of language we choose. The dog we notice on the street is but an image

filtered through the word "dog" as we learned it in our childhood language. We compare it to our first fox terrier, not to the Hound of the Baskervilles. Our learned selves may see the Hound of Heaven or even Cerberus, but only because *our* language is enriched by allusion. That is cultural literacy, to be sure, but richer than what is implied by lists.

"Style is the man," said the eighteenth-century biologist Buffon, and we understand the aphorism to mean that to others we *are* what our language shows us to be *within the limits of what language we share*. It is not enough for us to utter our meaning; we must have another person to hear our meaning within the shared language. Our first graders--indeed, our college freshmen--do not have access to *our* dog because we don't wholly share the language. The medium of exchange is *generally* shared, not wholly owned by either conferee, so its form requires social adaptation. One hears what the common language lets us hear. Distinctions made outside of the shared systems of signs simply don't exist in any practical way. Shakespeare or even the translators of the King James Bible, for example, cannot talk to our children; even we as adults have to invest considerable effort to become a fit audience, to share their language. We have to teach ourselves the contexts to become adequate readers of popular seventeenth-century entertainment. Our stage producers silently alter the old plays to make them accessible to the modern audience.

Classroom Expressiveness

My abstractions need a classroom example. Consider the bromide "Write about what you know" and its classroom analogues in autobiographical narratives, journals, and even descriptions of summer vacations. The underlying sense of the advice is to build on what you already have. Your basic information on the subject probably includes some reason for knowing it and thus some reasons for telling about it; that awareness implies a relationship essential to meaning.

The distance from what you know at the start to what you write at the end is the route of discovery. Giving shape to raw knowledge--selecting, organizing, relating, obeying rules of syntax, filling in gaps, finding comparisons--develops, sophisticates, the meaning as you understand it within your context. It is not a mechanical process--just writing up the results of your study--it is an active effort to write a new world into existence. Your words reconstitute the fragments of reality; that is, signs recognized by your society and embedded in your memory are arranged to suit the demands of your will. To undertake such an effort from total ignorance asks too much of a student--or even of a mature writer. It may even suggest why so much "news" reported in the journalistic media by "general news reporters" is drivel. The writers, lacking the essential contexts of knowledge which create meaning, merely fill out journalistic formulae.

The classroom versions of the advice to begin at home suffer in translation. A common prescription for designing assignments is based on the ambiguity of the term "expressive" and suggests that student writers express their feelings, their

values and beliefs. All writing does, but those hostile to the prescription call it "spilling one's guts on paper" or "letting it all hang out." Neither phrase is fair, but they are reactions to the flaccid explanations of some apologists for those ideas, and they cloud the problem of balancing individual will and social restraint in writing.

Put aside any question of whether a report of any lab experiment is really value-free. Ignore the problems of dealing with secondhand knowledge. Expressing feelings or even recent significant experiences is very difficult, perhaps not a task for insecure writers. One of our least successful trial exercises for the National Assessment of Educational Progress was to ask adults to finish their test session by writing about the experience of taking the test. They had enough trouble just returning to the test-taking world without having to make sense of it. When we ask distressed people to stand back to get perspective on some recent misery, we are acknowledging that having a close knowledge of the facts is not the same thing as expressing meaning or value. Rather, like Wordsworth, we seek emotions recollected in tranquility.

Even yet I dislike being asked what I thought of a play just as I come out of the theater; I don't know for sure until I've had a chance to ruminate, to try out various formulations. I don't suppose that the seven-year-old is so fussed by the question about what happened at school today--although I've noticed several go dumb--because the question is asked as a preface to dialogue, a maieutic inquiry which will guide and support an appropriate evaluation of the day's events. The same question intended as a demand for discourse might be as much of a problem for the child as the playgoer's question is for me.

With any student, finding the right kind of experience to draw on for school discourse is difficult. We must not invade privacy, nor offer ourselves as therapists, nor foist our meaning on them. The reason that the summer vacation is a joke-assignment rather than a personal revelation is that, in most instances, the meaning is forced and faked. Given the right questions, almost anyone could discover value in any short series of events, but the frame of "summer vacation" is, for most people, irrelevant. It is just a space of time made a bit painful by someone who wants writing for the sake of a writing sample at the start of a course.

What in a summer vacation is useful for a writer? What does it mean to have a summer vacation? Perhaps a timid but dutiful writer would find either word a prod. What events mean "summer"? I hear roller skates on the sidewalk, just after dusk, holding off the inevitable bedtime. Fireflies float on the warm air, and the scent of invisible roses wafts its way across the yard, but it is pride in new skills of locomotion that defines the summer night. Or then, perhaps, it is a vacation, an emptying. The conscious mind is turned off, and like a lizard on a rock, one accepts the world as it comes. Or a more aggressive writer might forget the key terms as such and focus on some event or idea that "just happened" during the time in question.

Timid writers inhibited by the form of school assignments might conscientiously report in mechanical order some generalized activities of the summer. The resulting paper bears some relationship to a real paper, much like the way an off-season, store-ripened tomato is related to one from the backyard garden. It is bright red and tempting to a winter eye, but basically tasteless. A well-

instructed writer might narrow the topic to a cluster of related events and make a story. The ones with a bent toward exposition will use the story to make a point; those with literary or gossipy minds will rise through detail to some climactic action.

Discovery and Control

My imagining responses for students does not quite define why a teacher might legitimately start with some form of autobiography. Our firsthand knowledge is what we acquire from our senses. This is the chaos that needs organizing in language. Language itself is secondhand, the organizing customs of a society. Formula writing--the lab report, for example--is also secondhand but rather specialized to standard circumstances for a subgroup of the culture, the language in a broad conception including standard written formats or rhetorical customs. Although all language insulates us from any *complete* experience as it focuses our attention on a part, specialized and technical languages are useful in part because the insulation of abstraction is even thicker. We are less distracted by sensory detail. That is why a case history may be dry; that is why military strategists might talk in terms of megadeaths; that is why machine-scored tests have the flavor of inevitability. You might say that academic language is specially designed to remove the human being from the discourse. We suppress one part of our mind to serve another.

The first need of the writer is to use the language to control experience, not

eliminate it. In a sense the child, in mastering the first words, in learning names, is learning to focus attention, to sort details in the secondhand way prescribed by parents. Listening to stories and then telling stories is another step in the process. Children learn to fit their own events into the story patterns they are shown, and eventually they emerge from the stage of "and then" storytelling. They acquire more options for interpreting the inexorable flow of events. To a large extent, we can measure maturity by observing the sophistication of storytelling techniques as much as we can from recording syntactical complication or T-units. But the raw material, the firsthand stuff, is the sensory knowledge. Small children, wrapped in sensation, need to learn the rudiments of language in social interaction at home, just as older children need to acquire the rudiments of our system for transcribing oral language into writing in social interaction at school. But these are only interim steps in the larger processes of creating meaning.

The problem for a teacher is to recognize where a student stands between the raw materials of life and the formulae of language. Too much freedom may paralyze a writer just as too much restriction may stultify. The real advantage in beginning with autobiographical events is that they are subject to many levels of sophistication of treatment, while still being based on the students' knowledge. Immature students as well as mature ones will have something to say and can thus succeed at writing well. They are authorities on what they perceive--even if their experience in finding an appropriate structure of expression may be limited--and they may not notice everything they perceive. The teacher's best role may be in helping students notice. The essence of a task may be repeated from year to year so long

as the phrasing doesn't suggest mindless routine, for the same reality reseen--revised, if you like--is a new challenge when the writer has grown more into language.

Some Discovery Exercises

Borrowing from the precedents of Theodore Baird, as modified by John Butler and minus the implicit Platonism, I might ask secondary or college students to tell me about some events in their lives that illustrate an abstraction--an experience, a confrontation, a betrayal, a frustration. "Experience is the best teacher," I might say. "Tell us about an experience you recently had." If I were to toy with Platonism, I might follow up with a cluster of stories exhibiting related abstractions: the experience contrasted with a "crisis" or merely with an "event" or even a "meaningless time." ("Meaninglessness" is an exercise only for the sophisticated.) That is, I might drive the story pattern through variations as a technique for exploring the conventional meanings of the stimulus abstractions. It is like Plato's exploring the meaning of the Good in the *Euthyphro*.

Or I might decide to set off exploration by suggesting narrative imperatives: the experience-as-it-was-understood-a-long-time-ago contrasted with a recent reinterpretation by a more mature self. Or I might prefer to explore rhetorical imperatives: the experience retold for different kinds of audiences (hostile, naive, family, strangers) for different purposes. In any of these ways the discussion of

student writing is likely to focus on technique, variations in the language. Underneath we are always inquiring about why some details are suppressed and others heightened, what justifies the order of details, how the connections between them are expressed. That leads to a consideration of "value." At each step we can refer to the sensation, the knowledge about which the writer is an authority.

The principle of assignment making I describe here for older students fits at all levels with adjustments for the background of the writer. We all live in time; long before school starts we have acquired a battery of ways to relate our experiences in time. Indeed, most of our knowledge of language is acquired outside of school, so children come armed with stories and verbal habits. Our efforts as teachers are to refine and extend what's there and to help people understand consciously what seems inevitable and beyond questioning. Given the diversity of this society and of human ability, we always need to begin with a period of diagnosis, a kind of verbal mating dance with students, to discover what comes next. As it happens, storytelling is the most common form of ice breaking. We "swap lies" at coffee break until we sense our companions' frames of reference, expectations. Although the exploration is meaningful primarily as a social ritual of unification, it functions as a basis for meaning making in storytelling. The teacher simply disguises and formalizes a common procedure.

Social Identification

Perhaps I had better detour for a moment to address explicitly the second function of language--the matter of social identification. Even though I have divided the functions and talked as though meaning making were a discrete activity, both functions are always served in any discourse, and their supporting processes interact. Each piece of writing defines us in relation to someone else. The language of the lab report presents a specialized self writing for an alter ego; most of us are not part of their dialogue; the language itself declares us aliens in that community of laboratory people. Much of the specialized college curricula is devoted to teaching apprentices the language customs of the roles they aspire to. The report form is even more important to the portrayal of a role than the white lab coat.

When Britton and Moffett and Macrorie talk about the role played by student writers in relation to teachers, they make explicit the underlying social relationships that turn so much school writing into mere exercises, or rehearsals of roles to be played seriously by adults. Often the writers evade making sense of the material because, as they concentrate on the real classroom need of learning to play a part, they are deflected from the impetus to signify the root message. In a sound class the concern for the needs of readers should enhance our concern for making sense, but we are limited in how many balls we can juggle at once.

I recall a distinguished engineering colleague who had earned his M.S. and had held a responsible job before he realized that a report ought to have a point for

the reader--to tell a story, as he reported the advice of the supervisor who sent the material back to be reworked. He had done very well at playing the social role of "engineer" without realizing that the form of the report was supposed to reveal an essential, professionally framed reality. In his college classes he was really asked to show off to the teacher that he had done the assigned work and had accepted the teacher's image of how an "engineer" sounds. One worries that often "writing-across-the-curriculum" programs will get caught on the social surfaces without in fact dealing with another current slogan--"writing to learn."

The social imperative should provide a positive pressure to give information, though. To be sure, many of our social routines are actually designed to render engagement unnecessary. There is a limit to how much the spirit can pay attention. Just as we may get groomed for the day's chores before we really wake up, we can go through a dozen cocktail parties without addressing a single serious question or a real person. It is sufficient at a party to make enough civil noise to demonstrate that we aren't enemies. We spend much time merely assuring people that the lines of communication are open should a real exchange become necessary. Still, our primary verbal responsibility is to represent what we understand as truth in a way that it can serve our fellow creatures.

The Truth of Abstraction

So again we are forced to consider with jesting Pilate, "What is Truth?" Expressed through language, it is always selective, filtered through the limits of a person and of language. The "whole" truth always escapes reporting. As we aspire to tell "it" as "it" is, we report events and concrete observations to give a body of factual information to support overreaching generalizations. One reason we value literature highly is that it is an attempt to "realize" our sensations in language. The tangible things it presents are likely to represent far more than themselves, but at the base it is sensuous. The stories we tell even with expository frames, the descriptions we linger on, and the metaphors we traffic in all start out representing firsthand knowledge as closely as we can. That is another reason that stories are likely to provide a good point of departure in a writing course. They encourage us to observe carefully; they remind us that a *person* observes, has a point of viewing.

Still, in our culture we expect people to generalize from their concrete observations. Even the Cheyenne, who reputedly expressed their legal precepts in examples or parables rather than in enacted codes, presumed that the auditors would generalize from the instance--apply it. Ungrounded generalizations common in legal codes are risky because they apply to particular cases in unexpected ways. I suspect that one reason Plato used the dialogue form was that it implied his general statements were true in a particular context, but possibly were not universally true, even though he seems to have presumed that the categories of language were directly representative of the forms of actuality. Whatever the

connection between language and what it represents, our academic and executive discourse is ordinarily categorical and hierarchical, highly abstract. That is what we are expected to teach. The transition from experience reproduced more or less sequentially in narrative to experience aggregated into an abstract concept is difficult in any classroom.

Suppose, for example, that a student, in telling of a distressing event, writes of her confusion on the first day of school or that another writes of his reaction to his parents' divorce. Neither has to claim knowledge beyond firsthand experience, even though each is probably aware that others have had parallel experiences. Indeed, each may capitalize on the expected sympathetic responses of others sharing the experience at least by hearsay. Still, the step from one's own history to writing about "student orientation programs" or the "effects of divorce on children" is a large one. Just what is the broader concept of which the writer's experience is merely a "case"?

Teachers might be tempted to send the student to the library at once to get "information." The library represents our collective memory, what we all have known on any subject. Although our individual memories--our experiences etched on our nervous system--create our own characters, our libraries serve the same function for our collective selves. In many ways the culture *is* what the library holds. But at best what it holds is secondhand knowledge and inert until it is retrieved for use by a person. Of course, I could make a case that once any experience has been reduced in language to something we can remember, it has also become secondhand--used, if you prefer. The sensations have been sifted and formed into a

constructed reality. The library is merely a collection point, so its abstractions are higher and probably embedded in alien contexts. The leap from one's own case to aggregated rule is probably too much for the novice.

Somewhere in between is a step making use of the dim awareness that one's experience is not fully unique, but short of expecting the austerity of the laws of Newton or Einstein. The lamest student is not a total isolate. Even the student who, in moments of frustration and self-consciousness, thinks that all other students are confident and informed and in control knows that at least some make mistakes. The context of rules and observations and admonitions reassures the schoolchild that others also need guidance. Sometimes we romanticize our uniqueness so much that we understate the notable similarity of our responses, but we are still dimly aware that we could not have the medical arts, for example, if it were not possible to assume that our bodies are essentially alike. Long before we go to the library to gather systematic parallels, we know that generalization is possible. We may generalize too quickly on too few instances, but we could not function even as a child without the ability to recognize how some events or objects echo each other. Although children expect adults to limit naive attempts to overgeneralize, the trick is to bring the awareness of generality to the surface so that it can be critiqued.

The student who recounted trouble moving into the dormitory might be asked to identify the source of the trouble and inquire whether others had the same difficulty. Inquiry would probably reveal that some did, some didn't, so then the writer might define the differences between the groups in order to prepare general advice for those who needed help. The child of the divorce is less likely to be able

to interview others in a like situation, but since the divided family defines one's life subsequently, such a person is also likely to have stored up information over a longer period of time or is more powerfully driven to consult some of the books in the library--mostly the self-help variety, but they offer an easy step to more abstract ones.

The final step is to discover what one must say. (That also implies "to whom for what reason," the social questions.) If the new dorm resident is an altruist--or someone who wishes to be a leader, a political servant to the crowd--she might write a report describing the problem and maybe even suggest solutions. She might also write a literary satire or a journalistic exposé or a handbook for new students. The child of divorce may more easily become lost in secondary information; so many people have written about divorce and the subject is so complicated that a weak writer may elect merely to paraphrase others, to borrow a structure and a selection of details from conventional understandings.

I don't mean plagiarism in the conventional school sense, and I concede that précis writing has educational virtues, at least in training readers to identify main structures and crucial evidence. Still, insecure writers are invited to rent ideas rather than own them, to accept one person's printed formulation as absolute truth. The structures and the choice of detail in the school document are imposed by essential ignorance, for the writer unable to assimilate his own experience into the published mass gives back all that he has assembled. One reason essay tests often provide tiresome reading is that answers given under pressure are expected to be little more than regurgitation of conventional structures and canned examples. The same can

be said of having grade schoolers paraphrase the encyclopedia or more advanced students offer a term paper with at least three citations, count-them-three. The raw materials remain essentially unprocessed by a human mind.

A Social Compromise

The personal essay, with its blend of narrative and explanatory energy, provides a fine middle ground in vivifying the abstract and external views with one's own sense of reality, but it does risk excessive self-revelation. Its literary base intimidates some students and invites pretentiousness from others, but like the personal letter it emphasizes the relationship between the writer and reader. (I also justify letter writing courses for older students on this same ground--not on the basis that letter writing is practical, but that it is social.)

Most adults--most children--develop a good sense of what should not be public knowledge because we are socially sensitive, but it is still true that most of us need to write about the ideas that make us anxious. We don't need external validation of what is commonplace to us. Children sometimes displace their concerns into stories; adults are more likely to retreat into abstractions. And much of the time both stories and abstract discussions are whimsies, matters of interest but not of deep concern. An outsider has to be clever to tell the difference in a student paper, for children from different subcultures have different social screens, and some think it is fun to bamboozle the teacher.

Practical counsel calls for the teacher to retain control of papers used for classroom discussion; even if the writer is not embarrassed, some classmates may be. Students should always be allowed to withhold a paper from class, too, for sometimes it is in the rereading just before class that they find out how much they have revealed. When we as teachers retreat into talking about rules of storytelling or patterns of exposition, we are being cautious about overstating our competence as therapists or moralists, but we are also asserting our roles as describers of how society generally deals with the problem in question. The "rules" we adduce as principles of good writing encourage the writer to make a "reality check" in terms of customs embedded in language. Did we ignore important information--or just fail to look for it? Did we generalize well? Did we maintain a constant ground of observation? If the connection is made explicit, does it still seem probable? These *are* writers' questions, but they are more.

Eventually any chain of exercises dealing with firsthand experience leads writers to understand context. One may start with the arm's reach, but the goal is to find how one's perceptions fit within the understanding of the community, the fellowship which defines us. Discrete and random exercises, the kinds one finds in culling a pile of textbooks for "what works," may also help even when the instructor has no explicit theory of instruction, for necessarily the traditional "forms" are derived from community expectations and to some extent determine them; standard "situations" leading to the letter of inquiry, for example, grow out of our common experience. Even if the task is explained and judged in terms of inert features--say, the inclusion of the return address or the use of a subject line--the task itself offers

an instructive subtext about human relationships. Some of us, given enough such random experience, tacitly generate the skill to write well. As social animals we relate the forms (even when they are not named) to social situations in daily commerce. Our daily oral transactions make some of us into effective interpreters of "reality," and our written transactions, by being fixed in time, make us more alert to the implications of our tacit decisions.

We have been somewhat diffident about teaching social interactions. Perhaps we worry that it seems like e work of a bad finishing school, applying gloss to dross. Or it is rhetoric as it was identified with the Sophists, the kind of thing we associate with bad advertising or shabby politics. Or it is merely play and games, as though games were trivial when they define how people act toward one another. At its best, play defines possibilities we apologize for as fantasy or distracting diversion, but it is still the blood of invention. And it is very likely what we ourselves do in our odd moments.

Any transaction requires at least two sensibilities, but both may be housed in the same body and certainly may be fellows in the same community. I'm conceding at the outset that we talk to ourselves much of the time, and we don't wait for New Year's Day in order to make resolutions, admonitions from one part of ourselves to another. Most of what seem like our decisions are just rehearsed responses, the actions of habit and experience, but I suppose that few of us approach new intellectual ground without internal dialogues between the venturer and the prudent skeptic, the sayers of "yea" and "nay." The most important transactions may be the private ones.

For a teacher, though, the public transactions are the objects of concern. We help the separate souls join the fellowship. In general educational jargon, we "socialize" students. In our disciplinary jargon we "communicate." *But in an ordinary way we help people discover who they are in relation to the folks around them as defined by some identifiable issue*. I'd like to believe that that is what serious people mean when they talk about rhetoric. And for the record I'll admit that I think literature is an especially intense formulation of language toward that end, so I am readily agreeable when someone wants to say that the business of departments of English, their genre, is rhetoric.

Vivifying the Audience

Let me come back to earth, the classroom. That society at hand is by definition made up of neophytes. Its members want to increase their capacity for entering into transactions, even though they may not understand that that is what instruction in writing will lead to. Suppose, as a guide, that assignments specify that unless otherwise noted, papers should be written for the other students in the class, and that on many assignments another audience might be specified. Suppose, too, that for every assignment some papers are copied and discussed in class. Sometimes the classroom audience is being addressed literally; the other students can respond as the people who are really reading the text. If they are bored or annoyed or amused or puzzled, their responses are important criticism. For tasks designed to

address other readers, where all of the students have faced parallel problems of addressing external audiences, they can share the joys of an editorial conference in which members combine their views of possible readers. I presume the assignment will allow the writer to exhibit a subset of the whole self most of the time. I can also imagine benefits in assuming a totally different role--say, that of Martian--but that is an odd experiment and usually results in a bizarre recombination of stereotypical aliens, some sort of nonself self, or in fact just a variation on one's own self.

As a tactic, the imitation editorial conference is a useful classroom strategy, discussed by teachers as "peer criticism." I suppose one might call it a democratic tutorial in contrast to the British student-to-don tutorial, but it makes explicit the dictum that writing must be useful to someone. Classroom responses constantly remind one of the difference between the intention of the writer and the awareness of the reader. To some extent the technique reduces the load of reading and comment for the teacher. One can avoid writing a comment on issues that will be discussed in class, for example. More importantly, the reactions of one's peers--one's fellows--are the guides to social survival.

Teachers are limited in their effectiveness as critics because they are paid to object, to be stuffy, to be impractical, and therefore can be safely ignored, much as parents can be ignored. In the long run our elders are models of behavior and ports in a storm, but in the short run they are in the way, in part because they represent a seemingly unattainable excellence. The very young can depend on their elders, throw themselves on the mercy of the court. Older students have to compete and are often frustrated by the comparison. Every time I hear a graduate

professor complain about the writing of a graduate student, I inquire about the debilitating effects of awe. Sloppy sophomores are silly because they think it doesn't matter; thesis writers (and often professors) are turgid because they care too much.

Implicitly I've defined a writing teacher as a coach, certainly, and a Socratic questioner, perhaps. I've largely denied that a teacher of writing is a didactic lecturer, except in incidental explanations resulting from questioning a text. The goal is not to give information but to perfect an art and to lead students to understand how language defines their relationships to other people and the external world. Although writing exists as an object, as a text, as a snapshot of a moment in the flow of time, still the essential quality of language (writing) is that it represents relationships to an external world, including other people. You'll note that I am evading the division into process and product; either taken alone is harmfully reductive to our understanding of writing. It is always both. You may for convenience elect to concentrate on an instant during which a text is called perfected; you may assume that the work of a dead writer is immutable because the gnawing of the worm and the erosion of the hot wind have stilled the authorial hand; but the *reader* (still living) changes and so the relationship to the text changes. Truth may endure forever, but people don't, so *reported* truths need revising and restating and rereading.

I belabor this truism because it underlies my concern with social function. When we talk of a rhetorical situation, we drift into a model of discourse that balances the relationships among writer, reader, external reality, and means of

signification. *Meaning*, in this model, is in the relationships. It is possible to describe a piece of writing in terms of which variable dominates the situation. If you emphasize the roles of the perceiver, you talk of the expressive function. If you emphasize the audience, you talk of the rhetorical or perhaps the persuasive function. If you emphasize the external reality, you talk of explanatory or reportive functions, or even argumentative ones in the sense that stresses logic. If you emphasize language, you talk of literature. All four elements are always present, but the emphasis, the primary concern, implies the purpose of an utterance and suggests what its formal features may be. This is the basic assumption of primary trait scoring of student writing, a holistic system of evaluating writing in terms of its social effects. The effect is understandable only in terms of the whole context, but the text itself can still be described in terms of the features of language.

Voice as Metaphor

This model suggests why the metaphor "voice" in writing has seemed attractive in the classroom. From one approach it allows explorations of self, old Freudian analysis. It also appears in existential tatters claiming to show how one can make authentic choices. But one can be equally comfortable relating the questions to traditional ethical proofs. One creates a reliable narrator, an authority, a person of trustworthy character in order to be persuasive. Or perhaps one moves toward a Rogerian psychology in negotiating agreements; one's self is exhibited in

accommodation. Perhaps even the self is explored in terms of transactional psychology. In most explanatory discourse the self is made transparent--at least, translucent--but that is in itself a major question about the limits of self. The traditional presentations of style emphasizing the creation of a recognizable manner of using linguistic variables lead to self in terms of usage. This kind of analysis can be repeated for each of the situational variables, but the point is that in the end every text depends on all of the elements. Our motives are always mixed, complex, so our ultimate concern is the relationship among them.

That is a difficult proposition in the classroom. Conventional wisdom says, "State a specific goal for each lesson and test the achievement of that goal and no other." Social dealings are rarely so simple, and we don't all learn the rules of language in the same order. Some parts of language are linear and rule-bound, but the most interesting issues must be approached heuristically and recursively because our ultimate interest is in relationships, not in parts.

The account of the difficulty in getting settled into the dorm becomes quite different when it is rewritten from the gossip appealing to fellow sufferers to the report encouraging the housing committee to change policies. The second version may contain the essence of the first one as an example, but the new context changes the character of the incident. And the voice of calm impersonal assurance that governs the report style alters the effect of the narrative. A philosophical student may ask whether the newly reported incident is even the "same" incident. Classroom editors are encouraged, in reading the second version, not merely to react in their own roles, but also to imagine what kind of report an administrator

would read. The dynamics of social relationships become the underlying class questions. What are the human qualities that bind tenant and landlord into a community?

In a sense all of us become playwrights and critics when we engage in writing for strangers. Writing for a fellow student is writing for an *alter ego*, a mirror image, even when we concede that student A is not student B. To write for the teacher is to write for an image of the school experience. We all know of the mythology of "psyching out" the teacher; it represents a stereotyping game much honored by students. It is based on standard techniques of generalizing--perhaps inadequately from too few data--but still showing a sensitivity to audience even when we feel obliged to point out that we are not teacher X or Y and are not asking for the same thing. But for practical purposes most older students write for the teacher as examiner without much thinking about it. In most instances, that means the teacher as corrector.

Errors

To some extent the role of reactor is inevitable for a coach of any kind. The student performs, the coach observes and provides feedback. The coach is a servo-mechanism--dispassionate as a measuring device--and a prod. Experienced writers develop their own servo-mechanisms for editing and revising, and most learn to overcome the temptation to take the first thoughts that come to mind. Still, the

external editor ordinarily seems to be a nay-sayer and a bully. As teachers we learn to affirm, to provide secondhand courage to our timid students, but even in the gentlest relationships we have to ask questions that will promote change in the writing, and this implies that the students' first efforts are wrong. When we stand in for the "real" audience we are identifying where we think that audience will react in ways the writer won't like. A measure of our effectiveness as nay-sayers is hidden in the oft-repeated jest we make about meeting adults who feel obliged to "watch their English" in our presence. We are the guardian dragons of the language, for society wants to think of us that way.

Mina Shaughnessy, those who write about miscues, and others have tried to redirect our concern for error to less threatening concepts. For a long time one of the most common types of research about writing took the form of error counts, and the negative flavor of the definition of error was taken for granted. Often the notion is so closely tied to ideas about "sin"--that is, "disobedience"--that we cannot respond calmly to what is really primarily variation. At least many of the instances of error we name are merely deviations from what readers who imagine themselves to be the quintessential representatives of "society" expect. But then the writer may not be addressing the general society. A sensitive reader tries to solve any coded message to imagine what the writer could have intended even when the verbal devices are unfamiliar or "deviant." With that I sweep aside the New Critics' fuss about intentional fallacies. Rhetoric can never ignore the possibilities of intention. "What one meant to mean" is not only a play on words.

Still, "errors" have negative effects on readers. We have to learn to see them,

even if we are dyslexic. The critic-reader--teacher or fellow student--tries to identify the troublesome features in terms of which readers will be affected. A writing teacher needs to consider systematically what errors affect what readers in what ways, because many variations represent a trade-off of winning one reader while losing another. That is an ultimate social challenge for anyone. Then, like Shaughnessy, the teacher has to infer what each kind of error reflects about the mental processes of the writer.

Classification of Error

Let me illustrate the problem with a division into five classes of error: (1) errors of transcription from oral to written language; (2) errors of usage representing dialect choices and formal ambiguities, often caused by loss of nonverbal signals in a shift from speech to writing; (3) errors of situational analysis usually represented in problems of register; (4) errors of relationship ordinarily identified as problems of reasoning and logic, but often equivalent to ignorance of the conventional forms of expressing rationality in Western society; and (5) errors of tact. Even a quick glance will suggest that these categories are arranged in ascending order of complexity and social involvement--and they interact. A thoughtful reader may even wonder whether the last two categories should be put into the same list with problems more conventionally called "errors." I hope that the gain from having all kinds of challenge to a sample of writing named on one scale outweighs the potential confusion of

blurring categories. I've never really liked the practice of giving a paper two grades--one for "writing" and "content" and one for "mechanics."

The most obvious and least arguable errors are those I've classed as "transcription." The invention of writing was a great intellectual breakthrough. It externalized memory and made libraries possible. As industrialization encouraged the amassing of capital to increase economic power, so writing allowed a kind of amassing of knowledge to increase cultural power. It arrested the flow of language to encourage contemplation of static ideas. It emphasized category and hierarchy, so it encouraged hairsplitting. It created the abstraction we call "the mass audience." Any of these effects could have been threatening to Plato, when inveighed against writing as not permitting one to ask questions of the text. Threatening or not, writing redefined cultures.

Yet, in an operational sense, the production of script is a relatively simpleminded mechanical task not clearly related to the production of thought. The fact of having written or being able to write alters the way humans process information, but the skills of thinking imposed by the change are different from the skills of stenography. Illiterate people--even the illiterate majority before this century--in a literate society are still bound by the constraints of writing in that culture, whether or not they can produce script, and yet calligraphers need not understand what they write nor be able to develop a text.

The most obvious illustration of this point is in handwriting. That is clearly a manual skill, and at least to some extent spelling seems to be manual too. In any event the separation of spelling from discourse is implied by the fact that spelling

lists are practicable means of teaching. (One may be better motivated by learning spelling as needed in producing texts, but that is another question. One's ability to spell one's own words in producing a text is not necessarily well tested in lists, for as we write, we simply avoid using words we don't know how to spell.) Issues about punctuation are a little messier because the marks represent features less easily "heard." For the most part, though, the production of script requires dexterity. Some very thoughtful and clever people are not dexterous. The extreme example is the dyslexic, who leaves out words and jumbles letters, but the issue is far broader.

Our schooling, our socially dictated sense of good behavior, rewards neatness even though we as teachers are familiar with errorless vapidity. Many people who complain about student writing, when pressed for examples, cite only skill in spelling and punctuating. They may simply not know how to talk about anything else; a good questioner may find that they are also concerned about lack of evidence or tact or point. What they struggled with in school, though, was producing errorless script. As a result, scribal errors have an excessive effect on readers. We might be able to take as an emblem Gary Larson's cartoon showing a cavalryman doubled limply over the palisade with an arrow in his back. A note has been carried by the arrow, and the arrogant Commander, upon reading it, says, "Ha! The Idiots spelled 'surrender' with one 'r'!" He is possessed by the trivial error.

Any variation is distracting, and scribal variation is usually pointless, but we often overreact to it. Scribal errors fit easily into mass-graded tests because the items are discrete and relatively fixed. The tests are hard to challenge and cheap to make, so they satisfy school boards and state officials. The scores are stable so

psychometricians like them. The skills required are teachable in neat classroom units, and they are markable with a minimum of emotional and intellectual engagement when one must struggle with a stack of papers. Correctness is a goal admirably suited to mass education. The only problem is that these features represent a narrow and practically trivial definition of writing.

We have to teach mechanics, though. No one in the elementary schools would have imagined otherwise, of course; all people need a broad range of scribal skills just to use the system in minimal ways, and children really are challenged by their first encounter with producing script. The dilemma for the teacher is that mechanical errors become the battleground for deciding whether students have written well. Ignorant supervisors think mechanical correctness is the whole war; students are made neurotic about possible errors on the one hand and yet are given an easy excuse for sloppiness when they want to express rebellion. If a teacher tells a child to write without worrying about spelling and punctuation in order to get an idea roughed out creatively, the parents report that the school is forgetting its basic task in teaching writing. And indeed, in resisting the outside pressures to niggle, some teachers have been known to overstate the case against demanding clean script, a presentable product.

Usage and Dialects

Conventionality in matters of lexicon, grammar, and syntax raises a different kind of problem. Native speakers of a language share control of its basic features, but all sorts of subgroups develop variations on the basic patterns. Some subgroups--hence some variations--are more acceptable than others. Racial, ethnic, class, vocational, regional, even blue-blooded subgroups, by virtue of different kinds of isolation from the mainstream, make their own patterns. Most of the variations are small, easily absorbed into the understanding of other groups even when not favored. But any difference sends a signal of some sort, usually one which tells whether or not the reader belongs. In fact, even split infinitives or who/whom problems and other standard textbook examples of usage problems primarily identify social backgrounds. I find it fascinating to listen to state legislative debates, just to observe how competitive groups are reflected in usage. Textbook correctness takes a beating. All of us find people who talk our language but "vote wrong," to be sure, but we also may find ourselves more comfortable making small talk--that is, making ritual noises--with people speaking "our way" despite their voting records. After all, in polite conversations we would avoid subjects about which one might have real opinions, so similarity of usage makes us companionable.

The difficulties here are in describing accurately which variations belong to which groups and ultimately in deciding when such variations are appropriate in discourse. The main social issue with Black English or BEV in the 1960s and 1970s was group pride, and those who objected to the exclusive use of the dialect were

perceived as opposing the people who used it. Experimental evidence suggests that most people need to see the face of the speaker before they can separate BEV from several other kinds of southern dialects, but in these matters, perception, not reality, is the issue. Racial politics encouraged taking sides. In school, tact is still required in offering children skills in dialect switching because it may imply criticism of families, but adults have become somewhat more sophisticated in separating objections to language variations as such from their dislike of other social groups. Still, we invite trouble--especially in writing--if we accept "substandard" usage, the choices that identify members of the "unwashed." Most of us have our favorite fussiness, but whether we should bully others about it is another question. I hate to recall the bother I had as a child learning to distinguish the proper occasion for "shall" or "will." Some kinds of fussiness are moderately widespread, but change is steady, and the rulings of editors are a bit inconsistent--even those of major usage panels for dictionaries. Probably we should just be frank in explaining to students about the unpredictability of manners.

My solution to these problems is to turn every class into a usage panel and thus demonstrate the principle of social variation. I try to separate the notion of error from these questions altogether--even though students will often hear "difference" equated with "mistake"--and encourage them to interpret what the variation signals. Perhaps this is one way of establishing a realistic view of how people keep strangers at bay. Every variation offers profit or loss possibilities in attracting or distracting or confusing audiences. Sometimes the class consciousness often expressed in British novels makes a useful teaching trick, for all of the

speakers seem a little strange to young Americans, and the class differences are often echoed in dialects. A good English teacher can clearly describe some patterns that differentiate groups without threatening anyone actually in the class. One can also play games with the British upper class "ain't," the correct contraction for "am not," which can be heard by Americans as "tough guy" or "blue collar" talk.

Decorum

That leads to my third category of error--inappropriate variation creating a counterproductive register. Usually this is a result of social ignorance of decorum, but it may come from willfullness. Most transactional writing in this country fits into a rather narrow dialect range--Edited American English, with a due effort to avoid schoolmarmishness. It provides a common scale against which we academic people can contrast the numerous oral dialects. So, too, transactional writing invites a relatively narrow range of formal registers, the term "formal," here, being used as Martin Joos uses it, to indicate explicit categorical signals and substantial social distance. The style of oral transactions is usually consultative, and I (like other essayists) have effected an imitation of consultation in this paper to reduce authorial distance, but usually we limit our range of variation to self-consciously formal signals.

My range of tonal techniques in this paper is somewhat illusory. My digressions, for example, like most digressions in the personal essay, are sleight-of-hand tricks for invoking academic disclaimers and qualifications. I jest in earnest to

sneak up on my point, but even then I risk your taking me too casually because, as I do so, I trifle with register. I risk it partly because I doubt that many souls are saved by twenty pages of haranguing. I am pretending to carry on a conversation, varying the register to raise your hope that I'll say something startling, something outside of the predicted line of discourse, as if in conversation.

I suspect that most problems of register derive from underconfidence. We put on airs, we become pompous, or we jazz it up for audiences we fear. It is hard to be self-effacing, simply to state the business at hand, and feel important. Hemingway claimed to have learned much from writing obituary notices in the Kansas City *Star*. T. S. Eliot spoke for the discipline of learning to write anonymous reviews for the *Times*. Either way one learns a decorum of anonymity that quiets one's desire to show off in trade to emphasize the certainty of the message. Such decorum can be deadly, almost parodic, as in some scholarly journals of a few decades back. People who "talk like a book" are implicitly being criticized for heavy-handedness in exhibiting impersonality.

In the end we must be decorous. We tell the children to mind their manners at the table, but we also observe that one minds different manners at a camp cookout. The stereotypical incident of dressing for dinner on a safari strikes most of us as nonadaptive behavior, not "standards" but "foolishness." Writing a scholarly article in an ethnic dialect, while making a point about the linguistic power of dialects, distracts us by its antidecorum. We adapt our behavior to a propriety of the moment, and yet overdoing the shifts also seems false. Either way we need to be aware of the social imperatives, and most of us slip from time to time.

Rational Relationships

Errors of relationship, my fourth class, are so complicated that they are often ignored in school or simply turned into formulae. Recent efforts to teach "critical thinking skills" suggest that many are aware of the problem, and in fact our textbooks and courses show that we have been concerned all along. The comparison paper, the definition, the process description, the cause-and-effect paper are examples of how we identify common situations that can be reported from canned outlines that still serve as heuristics. Often, advice included under "developing paragraphs," such as Francis Christensen's descriptions of cumulative sentences, deals with strategies for clustering details. Books emphasizing fallacies or propaganda deal with such errors. Comments on report writing or letter writing ordinarily reflect concern with conventions that ensure appropriately rational solutions to problems.

Relationships are ignored in our instruction, yet when I listen to our graduates talk about good and bad writing, I rarely hear them show awareness that we taught such material. Maybe the ideas are too hard to discuss in casual conversation, so when pressed for examples of "bad writing," they cite examples from my first two categories, but I feel that the issue is that the tasks they undertook in school remained specific and limited to class assignments. They aren't understood as *examples* of organization, but as particular forms to be memorized. Students learn

at least three patterns for organizing comparisons rather than what is implied by the notion of comparison. Or they learn how to compare a Big Mac with a Whopper but not how to generalize that skill to enable them to compare a Macintosh with an IBM PC. And they think writing deals with choices of "lie" or "as" rather than the means of devising job descriptions to be used for comparing job applicants.

The teacher faces the problem I do now. So many elaborations exist that one can't possibly deal with them all--or even with a decently representative number. If one deals with a few broad principles--say, division and synthesis, or balancing evidence against the principle to be "proved"--the level of abstraction is too high to help a novice with a particular situation. Furthermore, explaining errors often requires as much writing as the student produced. Time's winged chariot hurries, and our energies flag, so we are tempted to ask the class to memorize the middle names of American authors. The coward's way out is to claim that reasoning and thinking and logic are not problems of writing, but it's hard to imagine any sensible definition of language, that is, writing, that does not include a concern for the larger structures of relationship.

As for imagining what to do, I can offer little better than frequent writing about real questions for audiences who are prepared to challenge. Tell me that classes are too large, that parents are squeamish, that political powers don't believe in free inquiry, that teachers aren't trained. Perhaps, too, children and adults resist the hard labor of critical revision, or worse, become critical so soon that they can't even get a misshapened idea to paper. But I don't know of any shortcuts. I suppose formal logic and some math helped me, but debate with dozens and dozens of

opponents from eighth grade through college helped far more. Time after time on various subjects on both sides, I had to generate arguments, and that made all the difference. And I had a few teachers who asked real questions about what I meant in the papers. I don't want to be guilty of arguing from a single instance, or pointing to myself as evidence of success, but the problem of bridging the distance between the high abstractions of logic and rule-of-thumb responses of daily life is more than most can solve quickly. Even the practical discovery systems of our several academic disciplines are rarely explicated for novices in terms of abstract thought. We hear nasty remarks about "cookbook" laboratory tasks, for example (and I've made some), because the exercise itself demands so much attention that the principle is overlooked.

In the end we are all apprentices and need to learn tacitly from master crafters. We can acquire information in the mass market, and perhaps we can be inspired by the TV ministry, but the crucial skills of survival are learned hand-to-hand. That is, you can lecture about the history of language, you can inspire imitation by performing orally some fine models, but you have to *make* order.

Tact

Tact is even more difficult, for the term covers all of the ways we relate to other people. A broad conception of ethics is involved. I remind you that schools of law and business have recently noticed ethics, and that suggests that the study is at the

heart of society. Ethics, after all, represents what behavior a group values most and thus defines the character of the group. Here is where good writing is most clearly revealed as the ultimate social invention. Here is where we mediate the egotism of individual wills and accept the guidance of our greater selves in forming our collective sense of reality. Tact badly handled is "mere" rhetoric, the false semblance of community. Properly considered it is what makes a "goodly fellowship." It is what allows us to recognize the vision of a fellow human while retaining our own.

Most real profundities are not taught as lessons, although we can create conditions under which people discover them. Profound truths are by-products of a state of being. We can give examples, make comments, even mutter like Polonius/Senex in wise sentences. That is, we can don the costumes of caring, and should, but in the end we must belong, and that requires both work and submission. Some "methods" are better than others, but any method can be sterilized by indifference.

The World in Words

Given such a build-up you'll think the term "error" is woefully unsuitable for describing tact, character, human relationships. Yes and no. Probably some self exists and persists beyond language, but it is perceived by others moment-by-moment in fragments, just as other experiences are perceived. It is represented

ultimately in language of some sort--and in written language it acquires the solidity and permanence that "outlast marble and gilded monuments." Those teachers honored in Robert Harvey's *Celebration of Teachers* exist now, not in the flesh (even if by chance they are still alive), but in words. We can only guess how they conveyed their caring, but we are sure it was in action or in the flow of words now caught like flies in an amber memory. We understand that specific actions or words do not always reach our audiences, probably never reach all of a mass audience. We send out phrases like tracer bullets to guide subsequent phrases to our target. This is "successive approximation" in writing, a term really belonging to those who write in mathematical languages. Like stand-up comedians on the old theater circuits, we tell our stories over and over with different audiences until we find the way. But what remains is a physical record of language, and it can be described in static terms.

When young, I imagined that courses in psychology would help one imagine what people responded to, and maybe they did. A teacher, to be useful, must be a little like a scientist in observing students, must avoid too much assuming identity, too much entering the child, too much caring. We all know parents who are too wrapped up in their children even to see them clearly. We must contribute a detached third eye to our students. But still, a teacher of writing, a shareholder in the language, does not live by parsing alone. I started by saying, "Who pays attention to the syntax of things will never wholly kiss you." One has sympathy--that is, one feels with students in helping them discover what they want to represent. Criticize, suggest, challenge, goad--but the goal is to help the Other's will represent

itself, so one teaches real tact by being tactful, courage by taking risks.

You can guess that I am not going to prescribe any simple procedure for teaching or training teachers. Perhaps all that can be offered is a pervasive concern for how any passage might affect readers who, combined, represent a diversity of language experience. The teacher, at least, should in some sense be a linguist, and should induce in students a lively curiosity about language works. Even "exercises"--sentence combining, word games, light verse, invented language--all exercises that treat language as a thing in itself--can be talked about as the sport of our verbal community, and thus as guides to it. We are witty to show off, of course, but the audience must be capable of appreciating the deftness or the game's no fun. That's why poets must have great audiences. Any paper any time can be a class example, though. "How would this passage be different if you wrote for . . . ?" "What is in this passage that would limit its usefulness to . . . ?"

We who teach about language (and others, I hope, who teach about other things) offer situations that require writing as a means of discovery and reflection. Probably in distinction from those other teachers, we create a broad range of situations, and we encourage understanding of what goes on generally in the activity of writing. That is, we train writers to be skillful critics. We point out what other writers have tried. But in the end the student writes, we react, and the student writes again if our reaction has been meaningful. We are fellow writers.

In a perfect world we (and our successors) become unnecessary, for the students absorb us into their internal cast of thousands, the range of their possibilities, where we stand glowering, representing the grumpy critical mind. We

come to personify the Other, the second sight, the audience, the conscience, the Goodly Fellowship of which they and we are better or lesser members. It is the Fellowship made up of all who live by language, so if we personify it, we have been given a high honor.

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